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NSC BRIEFING

1 July 1953

CURRENT COMMUNIST POSITION ON A KOREAN ARMISTICE

We believe that Communist acceptance of the 8 June 1953 agreement on the disposition of POW's, following the Communist initiative of 30 March for resuming armistice negotiations, represented an important modification of the previous Communist position on non-forcible repatriation and reflected a genuine desire on the part of the Communists for a truce. We cannot estimate with certainty the considerations motivating the Communist decision for an armistice. We believe, however, that the reasons are to be found in the new Soviet regime's assessment of both the internal and external situation of the Communist Bloc; in the difficulties for the Communist Bloc in simultaneously supporting the Korean war, offsetting increased Western strength outside the Far East, meeting Chinese Communist military and economic demands, and assisting the launching of an ambitious

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industrialization program within Communist China; and in the fact that continuation of the Korean war carried with it the constant danger that it might expand in unwanted fashion.

Soviet and Chinese Communist leadership probably estimates that a truce in Korea is a necessary part of a world-wide program of conciliatory tactics and reduction of East-West tensions. They probably also believe that a truce would foster a sense of security in the West tending to undermine rearmament programs, develop an international climate in which latent differences among the major Western allies could reach serious proportions, and cause smaller nations to re-examine their participation in US-led coalitions. Communist leadership probably considers that, in addition, a postarmistice political conference, by raising such divisive questions as the future of Korea, the status of Formosa, and UN membership for Communist China, would provide the Communists a great opportunity for splitting the US from its major allies and discrediting the West in Asia.

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Following the 8 June agreement on POW's, rapid progress appeared to be being made toward concluding a truce when Syngman Rhee suddenly released approximately 27,000 anti-Communist North Korean POW's, 18 June. In reacting to this unilateral move on the part of Rhee, the Communists at Panmunjom publicly took the position, in their 19 June letter to the UN Command, that they were willing to conclude a truce either with or without Rhee's acceptance of it, if the UN Command would provide assurances that it could implement the truce. It is believed that the 19 June letter genuinely represents the Communist position.

What is in doubt is which kind of truce the Communists would prefer -- one which Rhee would support or one which Rhee would oppose. Communist insistence on implementation of the truce does not make clear whether they genuinely desire a peaceful implementation.

General Clark on 29 June proposed to the Communists that the draft armistice agreement be signed at once, despite the UN Command's inability to recover the 27,000 Korean prisoners released by Rhee. Clark promised to "make every effort to obtain the cooperation" of South Korea in implementing the truce. On 30 June the Pyongyang radio unofficially rejected Clark's proposal, characterizing it as "insincere" and as providing "no guarantee" of Rhee's future conduct. The broadcast reaffirmed the Communist demand for recovery of the released prisoners, a demand which, in their 19 June letter, the Communists had made a condition for a truce if South Korea were to be included.

As the Communists probably saw it, they were being asked to give up their demand for the recovery of the prisoners before it was clear whether the truce would be supported or opposed by Rhee. If they had done so, they would have relinquished one of their principal bargaining points.

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The Communists are aware that the Rhee-Robertson talks represent an American effort to prevent a split between the UN Command and South Korea. They cannot know at this time, any more than we can know, whether the talks will succeed. They thus appear to be marking time, refraining from committing themselves to any course of action as regards the prisoners or any other issue, until they see whether the UN Command and Rhee are to be united in their truce policies.

It is possible that the Communists would prefer a truce which would be unacceptable to Rhee and would be physically opposed by South Korean forces. This thesis assumes that the Communists are willing to accept the risk of the military situation getting out of control and of expanded hostilities.

If this view is correct, the Communists would hope that the Rhee-Robertson talks break down as a result of Rhee's excessive demands. In the event of a break down, the Communists

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would probably expect Rhee to put additional pressure on the United States to meet his demands. They would, therefore, probably wait for Rhee to take some such incendiary action as releasing additional prisoners, seizing UN supplies and equipment, inciting popular violence against UN personnel, withdrawing South Korean troops from the UN Command, or even taking independent military action against North Korea. Communist propaganda in this period would reiterate the Communist desire for a truce.

Following any such action by Rhee, short of operations against North Korea, the Communists would probably wait for the UN response before taking action themselves. They would probably want to determine whether the United States intended to persist in its efforts to repair the breach or intended to conclude a truce despite South Korean opposition, or intended to withdraw from Korea.

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If the United States were to persist in efforts to get Rhee under control, the Communists would probably continue to wait for developments. Assuming that American-South Korean agreements were reached, the issue of the Korean prisoners released by Rhee would immediately arise. Communist propaganda has asserted that South Korean forces are holding the prisoners and that Rhee can turn them back if he wishes. Reports from American sources in Korea confirm that Rhee could return the majority if he so desired. The Communists would probably estimate that Rhee, for reasons of face, would be unwilling to make a serious effort to recover the prisoners.

Still assuming that the Communist preference is for a truce to be opposed by Rhee, we believe that, if the UN Command were again to offer the Communists a truce following a break down of the Rhee-Robertson talks, the Communists at that time would accept it and would await American-South Korean conflict on its implementation.

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If, finally, the UN Command were to signify its intention to withdraw non-Korean forces from Korea or were actually to begin the withdrawal, the Communists would probably wait for the UN forces to complete the withdrawal. There would be a marginal possibility, in this event, of a Communist attack on the withdrawing forces and a Communist effort to occupy all of Korea.

We believe it more likely, however, that the Communists want an effective armistice and that they are waiting for the UN Command to offer adequate assurance that Rhee will respect a truce or that the UN Command will be able to enforce the truce without letting the situation get out of hand.

In other words, we believe that recent developments in South Korea have not substantially altered the basic situation which caused the Communists to move toward an armistice.

On this assumption, and if the UN Command were able to offer adequate assurances, we do not believe that the Communists

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would insist on the recovery of all the prisoners but would accept a portion of them. This view is supported by a recent statement by the Soviet Ambassador in Peiping to the Swedish Ambassador there that the Chinese demand for the recapture of all non-repatriates should not be taken "literally." The Soviet Ambassador stated that Rhee's coup had "no military significance," and that if the US took a more resolute line with Rhee it could prevent further sabotage.

In any event, the Communists are aware that Rhee objects to many provisions of the draft armistice agreement, and they probably expect that the Rhee-Robertson talks will result in new agreements which would have to be renegotiated with the Communists. Rhee has publicly called, for example, for immediate withdrawal of Chinese Communists forces, for a time-limit on the postarmistice political conference, and for conclusion of an American-South Korean security pact before a truce is signed.

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Even if we are right in believing that the Communists desire an effective, peaceful truce, they would almost certainly reject any American-South Korean proposal that Chinese Communist forces withdraw from Korea before the political conference begins. They would point out that the draft armistice agreement calls for the question of withdrawal of foreign troops from Korea to be discussed at that conference. There is no way to force the Communists to effect such a withdrawal, outside of the conference, without imposing a total military defeat on the Communists.

The Communists would also almost certainly reject a cut-off date on the political conference. Discussion of the fate of prisoners who remain unwilling to be repatriated after Communist "explanations" to them, the first question on the agenda, is limited to 30 days. However, the two larger questions remain: the permanent status of Korea, and the withdrawal of foreign

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forces. Beyond these questions, the Communists hope to discuss China's seat in the UN, the status of Formosa, and perhaps other Far Eastern questions. Moreover, the Communists might regard a proposal for a cut-off date as evidence of an American-South Korean intention to resume hostilities at that time.

The conclusion of an American-South Korean security pact would not necessarily be a barrier to signing a truce. Communist propaganda has already denounced a prospective pact as evidence of American-South Korean collusion to "wreck" the political conference, "torpedo" a peaceful settlement, and "launch a new war." The Communists have not suggested, however, that they would refuse to sign a truce on such grounds.

The Communists would probably not object to the pact if its terms did not commit the United States to Rhee's support in the event of a South Korean attack on North Korea. There is a chance, however, that the Communists would regard the pact as

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implying American support for Rhee whether an attack on North Korea were undertaken with or without American encouragement. In this event, the Communists might refuse to sign a truce until given assurances that the United States would not support Rhee in violating an armistice.

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